Nassau County Comptroller's Office
Telecommuting Assessment

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020 created an unprecedented challenge for continuing office operations and identifying new approaches to work. The unique situation presented a host of complex challenges for the leadership of the Comptroller's Office. By the conclusion of this emergency period nearly 16 months later and the subsequent return to in-office operations, staff had grown accustomed to a schedule that included telecommunicating.

The leadership within the Comptroller's Office sought to analyze and assess both the successes and challenges of the telecommuting period. Coupled with industry practices, the information is intended to inform potential decisions regarding future work environment policies and practices.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Office of the Nassau County Comptroller conducted an assessment of telecommuting during the defined COVID-19 "emergency period" of March 2020 - July 2021.

A multi-faceted approach was used to conduct the assessment. This approach involved the following activities:

➡ Document Collection and Analysis
➡ Industry Research
➡ Management Staff Engagement Interviews
➡ Comptroller Staff Survey
➡ Analyze and Compile Assessment Results
➡ Report Findings

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key observations and the analysis of results from a survey* of Comptroller employees assessment include the following:
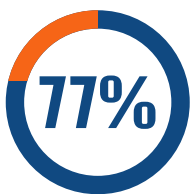
77% of respondents preferred **hybrid** working arrangements (a combination of in-person and telecommuting work).

13% Neutral or Disagree
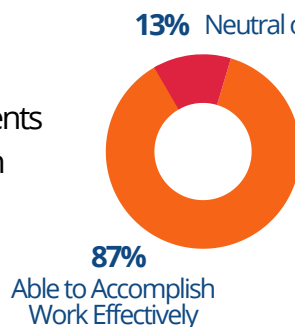
87% Able to Accomplish Work Effectively

The overwhelming majority of respondents (87%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were **able to accomplish their work effectively during the telecommuting period**, with a small minority (13%) neutral or in disagreement.

*The survey was administered from September 21-27th, 2021 via an online survey link distributed by work email to Comptroller's Office employees. The survey was conducted anonymously, and respondents were limited to one completed response per individual. A total of 70 complete survey responses were received, representing a 91% participation rate and included representation across all divisions.

93% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Comptroller **leadership was effective** in managing the work impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The **lack of a formal written policy** for telecommuting beyond the COVID-19 emergency period is a source of concern for the leadership team.
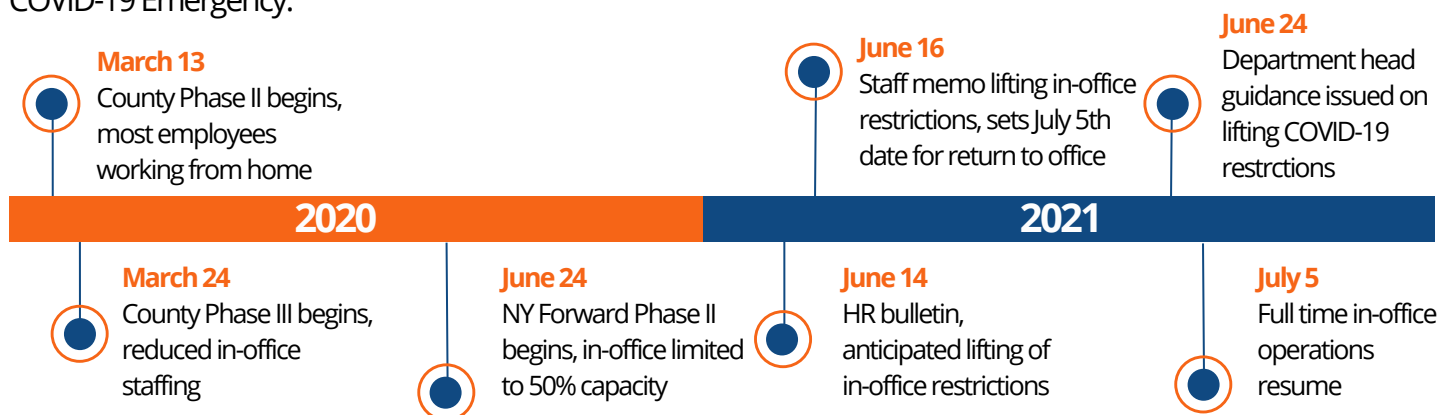
79% of respondents felt that they were **adequately trained** to use the technologies/equipment provided to them to successfully telecommute

though there was a desire that the training had come sooner/prior to the telecommuting period. Management expressed the **need for centralized training supports** to effectively manage telecommuting teams.

COVID-19 EMERGENCY TIMELINE

The following provides a timeline of major milestones of the Office of the Nassau County Comptroller defined COVID-19 Emergency:

March 13
County Phase II begins, most employees working from home

June 16
Staff memo lifting in-office restrictions, sets July 5th date for return to office

June 24
Department head guidance issued on lifting COVID-19 restrctions

2020 | **2021**

March 24
County Phase III begins, reduced in-office staffing

June 24
NY Forward Phase II begins, in-office limited to 50% capacity

June 14
HR bulletin, anticipated lifting of in-office restrictions

July 5
Full time in-office operations resume

MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Adaptability

➡ Generally, management believed that the transition to telecommuting **went well**. Technology was deployed quickly and management were satisfied with the Office's ability to pivot when the Governor's Executive Orders required a mandatory physical shut down, the County Executive pivoted to telecommuting.

➡ Accommodations were made for different individuals on scheduling, work hours, health requirements, etc. Staff were greatly appreciative of accommodations made to allow telecommuting and put the health and safety of County respondents above other considerations. Staff felt it promoted a **better work-life balance** and **allowed greater productivity**.

➡ The realization that working in an office does not always equate to 100% efficiency. **Office-based distractions**, which are similar to **home-based distractions**.

Managing Expectations

➡ Management maintained worries about whether staff were productive when telecommuting, especially when they lagged in communication. **Refocusing** on productivity, efficiency, and oversight measures versus just having a "physical presence" will be needed to support telecommuting long-term.

➡ Formalized guidance is needed regarding **work/performance expectations** when telecommuting.

➡ **Core hour availability** and **monitoring mechanisms** (adequately communicated to respondents) may be needed to enable telecommuting productivity.

➡ Potential need for **performance expectations** and **telecommuting norms**.

Communication

➡ **Regular communication** among team members was a key success area.

➡ Procedures are needed to **establish communication protocols** going forward (when to use electronic communications such as Microsoft Teams vs. email vs. phone, etc.).

➡ Communication was **sometimes inconsistent**, with staff not contacting management as regularly for urgent issues (i.e., waiting until they were in office to discuss something vs. reaching out when they worked from home).

Policies & Procedures

➡ In the future, **the lack of a written policy** surrounding telecommuting is a source of concern among leadership. Most staff would like a **hybrid** model.

➡ Management found it challenging to **schedule hybrid teams**, adding a strain to their workloads, but were generally able to work through issues.

➡ Staff will retain some **telecommuting-adopted practices** in-office (e.g., regular team meetings, formalized communication structures, some digitized processes, etc.).

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

➡ **Technology** - laptops, peripherals, cameras, VPNs, phones, etc., ready to be deployed and tracked, staff trained on resources in advance.

➡ **Written Policies** - telecommuting policy, core hour flexibility (if applicable), in-office vs. telecommuting schedule. Oversight procedures in place (and communicated to staff) surrounding telecommuting expectations.

➡ **Communication** - protocols over which mediums to use for which purpose (email, Teams chat, calling, etc.). Advance warning (if possible) of future telecommuting periods. Advance notice of return to in-office work.